

REMARKS

ON

Several late PUBLICATIONS

RELATIVE TO THE

DISSENTERS;

IN A

LETTER TO Dr. PRIESTLEY.

By a DISSENTER.

WILLIAM ENFIELD

*It were good, that men in their innovations would follow the example of time itself; which indeed innovateth greatly, but quietly, and by degrees scarce to be perceived.*

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FROM

JOHN D. COLE

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UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

8A



T O

Dr. P R I E S T L E Y.

*Rev. Sir,*

**F**ROM your late publications the world has seen, that you are a steady friend and an able defender of the Dissenting interest; that you have formed accurate and enlarged ideas on the subject of civil policy, and are a zealous advocate for the natural rights and liberties of mankind; that you have been assiduous and indefatigable in your researches after truth; and that you are endeavouring, with a generous and laudable enthusiasm, to propagate useful knowledge.

On these accounts, you highly deserve, and you have, doubtless, obtained the esteem and applause of your fellow-citizens. The Dissen-

ters acknowledge themselves greatly indebted to you, for the pains you have taken, to make them properly sensible of the excellence and importance of their cause, and attentive to their own interests; and to give their brethren of the establishment, and their civil governors, a fair representation of their religious and political principles and conduct. (*a*) The true friends of liberty, who wish to see civil government encumbered with as few inconveniences, and productive of as many blessings, as possible, are pleased with your bold and spirited, yet judicious and manly attempt, to cast new light upon this important subject. (*b*) The lovers of science and literature express great satisfaction in what you have already done, to ascertain the extent, and enlarge the boundaries of human knowledge, in one particular branch, (*c*) and to facilitate the acquisition of it in others; (*d*) and from your well-known thirst after knowledge, application, and public spirit, they promise themselves that you will not desert this path of usefulness and reputation. And wise and good men in general admire and applaud the indus-

(*a*) See View of the Principles and Conduct of Dissenters.

(*b*) Essay on the Principles of Government.

(*c*) History and Present State of Electricity.

(*e*) Biographical and Historical Charts.

try and zeal, with which you serve the cause of truth, virtue, and religion.

I cannot deny myself the satisfaction of bearing this public testimony to your merit, both as a writer and as a man. You will, however, easily suppose, that it is not my only design, in this letter, to write your panegyric. And you are, I am certain, too much engaged in prosecuting important designs, for the benefit of mankind, to have leisure or inclination to attend to the trifling eulogium of an anonymous author.

I am sincerely desirous, that your attempts to lead mankind to think judiciously, and to act consistently, on the important subjects of religion and morality, may be successful. I cannot, therefore, observe, without concern, that several things, in your late publications, seem to discover a degree of precipitation, inattention to real life, and vehemence of temper, which, I am afraid, will be of little advantage to the cause you mean to serve.

If, after having perused what follows, it shall appear to you, that I am right in this remark (in which, by the way, I am far from being singular) I shall, perhaps, prevail upon you,



you, to restore *Discretion* (*a*) to its proper place in your system of virtues. It is possible that the following observations may, likewise, serve to remove some unfavourable impressions, which your manner of expressing yourself may sometimes have made upon the minds of your readers. And if these ends be answered by the present publication, you will have no reason to censure, nor I to repent of, the freedom with which I have written.

You will not think it a matter of any consequence, that I have not prefixed my name to these remarks. Whether the considerations here suggested are solid and important, or futile and trifling; whether they are worthy of notice from you or from the public, or deserve to be treated with neglect by both, cannot in the least depend upon this circumstance. Besides, I am of opinion, that notwithstanding some little inconvenience which might possibly occur, it would, on the whole, be greatly favourable to the progress of knowledge, if all controversies from the press were anonymous. It would prevent the influence of personal considerations; and give a larger scope for the investigation of truth.

(*a*) View of the Principles and Conduct of Dissenters, &c. Preface page 3.

The

The pamphlets published under your name, of which I propose at present to take notice, are, "Remarks on some paragraphs, in the fourth volume of Dr. Blackstone's Commentaries on the Laws of England, relating to the Dissenters": "Considerations on Church Authority, occasioned by Dr. Balguy's sermon on that subject:" and "A View of the principles and conduct of Protestant Dissenters, with respect to the civil and ecclesiastical constitution of England". Besides these, there is another, entitled, "A free Address to Protestant Dissenters, as such"; the style and manner of which bears a striking resemblance to those of the publications just mentioned; and in which, as you have acknowledged, (*a*) your sentiments concerning the Test-act, and on most other subjects relating to the Dissenters, are fully expressed." Without presuming to determine whether this is your *real*, or only your *adopted* child, I think I may, therefore, fairly suppose, that you will take it under your protection, and vindicate its character, at least so far as you approve of it, and will have no objection to my admitting it into the same class with the pamphlets before mentioned.

(*a*) View, &c. page 32.

Having

Having now introduced myself to your acquaintance, as far as is necessary for the present purpose, give me leave, Sir, in the first place, to make a few remarks on the view, given in the above-mentioned Pamphlets, of the principles and conduct of the Dissenters.

As a Dissenter, I think with you, that religion is properly a personal concern, to which every man ought to attend for himself; that every man has an equal right, and is equally obliged, to judge for himself, with regard to the worship and obedience which he owes to his Maker, and to follow the deliberate judgment of his own mind, unbiaſſed by any considerations whatsoever; and that no man, or body of men, can have a right to impose articles of faith or modes of worship upon others, and to subject those who differ from them to any kind of hardship or suffering. These are maxims, in which, I suppose, every Dissenter, who is such from enquiry and conviction, and not merely from education and custom, must be agreed; maxims, on which, I apprehend, their conduct may be vindicated, against all the attacks of subtle reasoning, or of ridicule and contempt.

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These principles were, doubtless, sufficient to justify the resolute opposition, which the Puritans and Nonconformists of the last century made to the encroachments of ecclesiastical tyranny. They justly considered themselves, as bound in the first place to regard the dictates of their conscience, and the laws of their Maker : and when their temporal or spiritual governors enjoined upon them such things, as were inconsistent with what they apprehended to be their duty ; it was wise, it was pious, it was highly commendable in them to obey God rather than man. And the fortitude and chearfulness with which they suffered persecution, rather than resign their integrity, will be admired and applauded, as long as the history of their times shall be preserved. Nay, it may perhaps be asserted, that, in their situation, they might have been excused, and even justified, in making a resolute stand against the *imposing spirit* of their rulers, even though the *things themselves* which they required of them had been liable to no considerable objection : in like manner, as the conduct of a people might be vindicated, who should oppose the encroachments of arbitrary power, in the civil state, though the instances in which they at first appear should be, in themselves, of little consequence.

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And

And it is on solid principles, and with good reason, that the Dissenters of the present age tread in the steps of their forefathers, and continue the separation from the Church of England. For, though, partly through the present state of our laws, and partly through the wisdom and mildness of administration, and the spirit of the times, they enjoy the most important advantages of toleration, and consequently have little room for complaint; their natural right of judging and acting for themselves still remains. If they apprehend that they cannot become members of the established church, without forsaking the path of duty, and offering violence to their consciences; or even if they are persuaded, that they can worship their Maker with greater propriety and advantage, and have a fairer prospect of improvement, in any other society of christians; they are, doubtless, at full liberty, nay are under a moral obligation, to separate themselves from the establishment.

On these principles it is that I profess myself a Dissenter, and that "I glory in the name." I apprehend that there are many things in the constitution, doctrine, and worship of the Church of England, which are liable to considerable

derable objections. This has, I think, been made sufficiently evident, in the “Free and Candid Disquisitions;” in the “Letter to Mr. White;” and in other similar publications; and must, indeed, be obvious to every one, who will give the subject a fair and careful examination. It is, moreover, with me a material objection against the Church of England, that it in a great measure, precludes improvements in the mode of religious worship, and obliges its members to sit down contented in its present imperfect state. All knowledge is progressive; every art and science is capable of improvement. Why then should it be imagined, that we have reached our *ne plus ultra* in religion? Why should any human institutions obstruct our progress in this path, or say, “Hitherto shalt thou go, but no further?” In proportion, to the importance of religion, improvements in it must be desirable. It is the peculiar privilege of the Dissenters that they are at full liberty to make these improvements. And this liberty, appears to me to be so evidently the unalienable right of every man, and to be of so much importance to the progress of religious knowledge, and to the interests of piety and virtue, that I should



think myself fully justified in dissenting from the Church of England, whatever alterations might be made in it, while it continued to require from all its members the profession of the same faith, and the observance of the same forms of worship, without allowing for the different opinions of mankind, or encouraging a spirit of enquiry and improvement.

But, though I think the principles, on which the dissenting interest is founded, solid and important; though I sincerely wish to see it supported; yet I must freely own to you, that I am not thoroughly satisfied with the manner in which it is continually represented, in the publications which gave rise to these remarks, as the cause of truth, religion, and liberty.

There appears to me to be something extremely vague and indeterminate in the phrase, the *cause of truth, religion and liberty*; and before any attempts were made to excite our passions, or solicit our generosity, in behalf of this cause, some pains should, I think, have been taken to give us precise ideas concerning it. Some persons may, perhaps, for want of this, imagine (as you know it is extremely easy to  
fancy

fancy very extravagant things of ourselves, and of the party we espouse) that truth, religion, and liberty are only to be found with Dissenters; or at least, that we are not to expect any considerable progress in any of these important articles, but among them: neither of which, I think, the most ingenious and zealous Dissenter will be able to prove. If it be allowed, that the Church of England holds the most important truths of religion, in common with the Dissenters; that the duties of devotion are performed with as much regularity, and, for aught that appears to the contrary, with as much sincerity, among the former as the latter; and that the present members of the Church of England do allow, and many of them vindicate their brethren in their natural right of free enquiry, and of separation: if these things be acknowledged, which cannot, I think, be denied without manifest partiality and bigotry, it is arrogance in Dissenters to appropriate to themselves the cause of truth, religion, and liberty. This is a cause which is common to us all, by whatever denomination we are distinguished, both as christians and as men; a cause which all wise and good men, whether they call themselves members of the established church, or Dissenters, will esteem

teem it their duty to support. And, therefore, whatever advantages the former may enjoy above the latter, or however solid the grounds of their separation may be, it must certainly be a great impropriety, to term the dissenting interest, as such, the cause of truth, religion, and liberty.

But if the dissenting interest be allowed to be the cause of liberty, there seems to be no particular propriety in reminding us of this, at the present time. It is certainly true, that Dissenters are, from their situation, friends (though, by the way, they are frequently very inconsistent friends) of liberty; that the only thing, by which we are distinguished as a body, is by claiming to ourselves the right of private judgment in matters of religion; and that we ought to be zealous in defence of these important rights, and in support of a cause for which our heroic ancestors sacrificed so much. And, if our natural rights were materially invaded; if we acutally suffered fines, imprisonments, corporal punishments, or any other considerable hardships; or even if we were threatned with severe treatment, on account of our dissent, it would then be a proper season, to awaken the zeal of  
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Diffenters in defence of their common rights. But, while we are permitted to worship our Maker, in whatever manner we judge most proper, and publicly to declare and support our religious opinions, both from the pulpit and the press, without fear of molestation; what propriety can there be, in endeavouring to recall our attention to the subject of religious liberty, and guard us against submitting to the yoke of ecclesiastical tyranny? Did not the prevalence of good sense and moderation, both in the superior and the lower classes of mankind, secure us from all danger of persecution, one might fear, lest such ill-timed zeal should rouse the sleeping lion, and put an end to the tranquillity which we at present enjoy, and which we cannot value at too high a rate.

All that seems desirable, with regard to Diffenters, in their present situation, is, that they should make use of this right, so far as to choose that form of worship, which appears, upon comparison, most eligible; and that they should conscientiously adhere to it, till they shall see reason to alter their opinion, and consequently their practice, on this head. To remind them of their principles, and the grounds of their separation, and endeavour to awaken  
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in them a spirit of enquiry, with regard to these subjects, is, doubtless, sometimes highly expedient. But, there is always great danger, lest, while we attempt to give them rational views of the dissenting interest, and inspire them with a proper degree of zeal in its support, we should divert their attention from the more important subjects of practical religion and morality; and lest we should place the dissenting interest in general, or any particular sect of dissenters, in such a light, as to encourage a spirit of bigotry and censoriousness.

Whether there is not real danger, lest some things, in the publications referred to above, should have this unfavourable effect; or whether my suspicions on this head are without foundation; you will perhaps be better able to judge, when you have given some particular passages an attentive revival.

Must it not tend to give the Dissenters an unreasonable and bigoted attachment to their own *principles* and *practices*, to say, as the author of the Free Address has done, (a) “that  
“ he does not think there is any thing in *either*,  
“ so palpably open to objection as to require

(a) Preface page 2.

“an apology.” Are not many of those things, which he says stand in need of an apology in the Church of England, to be found, in an equal degree, among many of the Dissenters? for I do not perceive that the author confines his remark to those of them who are called rational. Do not by far the greater number of them receive and zealously defend the doctrines of original sin, predestination, trinity in unity, satisfaction by vicarious punishments, &c. &c? Is not the method of praying, from immediate conception, or from accidental memory, generally in use among them, liable to very obvious and considerable objections? Is there not, in many of their churches, a kind of ecclesiastical jurisdiction established, by which those who join themselves to their communion are obliged to give an account of their faith and their religious experience, and to submit to church-censure? Are not their ministers generally required, at their ordination, to deliver a confession of their faith, and such a confession as shall nearly coincide with the system of belief adopted by the societies with which they are connected? Is not this custom still retained, in reality at least, if not in name, among most of those who are by way of distinction styled the rational Dissenters? And does it

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not approach very near to those subscriptions to articles of faith, of which we so justly disapprove in the churches of England and Scotland? Are we not so superstitiously attached to our particular forms of worship, and to every the most inconsiderable circumstance relating to them, that the proposal of any alteration, though most evidently for the better, would meet with general opposition? And may it not be said concerning these things, with equal truth, as concerning the defects with which the Church of England is charged, that (*a*) "they want some apology, since their reasonableness is far from being evident at first sight."

Is not the same kind of partiality observable, in the account which you have given of the principles of the Dissenters, in your View, &c. (*b*) where you assert, that we all disclaim human authority in matters of religion. Though it is certain, that, if Dissenters were consistent with themselves, they would disclaim all human authority in matters of religion; though the more sensible and judicious among them actually do this; yet it cannot be necessary to

(*a*) Free Address, Pref. p. 3. (*b*) page 7.

inform

inform you, that great numbers of them pay a degree of regard to the opinions of some eminent Writers among the Puritans and Nonconformists of the last age, and particularly to the confession and catechisms of the Assembly of Divines, little, if at all, inferior to that which the members of the establishment pay to the articles and liturgy of their church. This submission to human authority in matters of religion likewise appears, in the implicit regard, which many of the Dissenters, particularly among the lower classes of the people, pay to the word and opinion of their ministers. In this respect they greatly resemble, though they do not indeed equal, the body of the people called Methodists, who have given their leaders a more than apostolic authority over them, and tamely follow wherever they please to conduct them. And while this disposition towards implicit faith and obedience prevails, it is of little importance, whether it hath for its object, the hierarchy of the Church of England, the decision of an Assembly of Divines, or the *Ipse dixit* of a *Whitfield* or a *Wesley*. In any of these cases, the blind attachment (*a*) is still the same, though the object of it be changed;

(*a*) Free Address, p. 65.

and the mind is very far from being at liberty to enquire after truth, or to deliberate upon the expediency of different forms of worship.

Farther, doth it not tend to give the Dissenters too high an idea of their own importance, and that of their cause, to assert, (*b*) "that we are to look for the advancement of the necessary work of reformation from the errors and abuses of Popery to *Dissenters only*, of whatever denomination, in every christian country?" It is, doubtless, true, that statesmen, as such, seldom choose to concern themselves greatly about reformations in religion, and generally think it most prudent to leave things of this nature, in the state in which they find them. It is also true, that when the civil power has interposed in the business of religion, it has commonly happened, that they have established error and superstition, and retarded the work of reformation. But some intermediate steps are surely necessary to conduct us from these premises, to this conclusion, That Dissenters are the only persons, from whom a reformation is to be expected.

Is it impossible to suppose, that, in an age so remarkable for improvements in knowledge of

(*b*) Free Address p. 3.

every



every kind as the present, it should happen, that both the clergy and laity, should become generally sensible, that there are many capital defects and improprieties in the constitution and worship of the Church of England, and should publicly express their desire of seeing the whole system revised and altered? (*a*) Is it impossible to suppose, that the time will come, when a considerable number of the most respectable members of the establishment will unite their influence, to bring about such a change as has been already attempted by many individuals, and particularly by the modest and judicious Authors of the *Free and Candid Disquisitions*? Is it impossible to suppose, that, should this, at any time, appear to government to be the general sense of the nation, a desire of giving satisfaction to the people in so important an article, and of encouraging a regard to religion, which is manifestly connected with the prosperity of the state, may induce them to make such alterations as shall then appear practicable and expedient; at the same time leaving full liberty, and making actual provision for farther improvements? If there be nothing absurd, or greatly improbable in these suppositions, a re-

formation

formation *may* take place in the Church of England, without the assistance of Dissenters, even though her laity should not dissent, nor her clergy resign their preferments.

Nay, it seems more natural to expect that these improvements should be effected by the wisdom and zeal of the members of the establishment, than that it should arise from any proposals or efforts which Dissenters may be able to make for this purpose: for the former are immediately and personally concerned in such improvements; the latter only more remotely, as they might tend to advance the honour of religion, and promote the happiness of the community. I believe I may even assert, that, unless the improvement of the established church comes from its own members, there is little reason to expect, that it will take place at all. For the generality of the Dissenters are too much averse to any kind of change among themselves, to be able, with a good grace, or with any prospect of success, to recommend improvements to others: and, with regard to those of them, who have more enlarged views, and a more catholic spirit, their numbers are too inconsiderable, and their in-

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fluence too small, to be capable of producing any important effect.

And as the Author of the Free Address, &c. seems to expect too much from the Dissenters, with regard to the progress of the reformation from Popery, so, I apprehend he has placed the advantages of their situation, with respect to the discovery and propagation of religious truth in general, in a flattering point of light. Dissenters are, doubtless, as hath been before hinted, free from many difficulties and restraints, under which the members of the established church, and especially the clergy, labour, with regard to freedom of enquiry: and with these advantages, they doubtless ought, and might, perhaps, in theory, be expected to examine every subject with impartiality, and make continual progress in religious knowledge. But we find that, in this case, as well as many others, there is a wide difference between speculation and experience; and that freedom of enquiry and sentiment prevails as much among the laity, and even the clergy, of the established church, as among Dissenters.

If it be asked, how it comes to pass that Dissenters, with their peculiar advantages,  
make



make no greater progress in religious knowledge ; I answer, that it is chiefly to be ascribed to two causes : the first is, that a bigoted attachment to the system of opinions, or modes of worship, in which we have been educated, is a weakness which few are able to conquer : the second, that the teachers of religion, either cannot divest themselves of the prejudices of education, or, through fear of incurring the displeasure of their hearers, and of losing the emoluments of their office, choose to take very few, and very cautious steps towards improvement. I say, *through fear of losing the emoluments of their office* ; for (notwithstanding what is asserted in the Free Address, (a) that dissenting ministers enjoy no emoluments in consequence of their assenting to any religious opinions or practices, and therefore are under no temptation to equivocate with their consciences) I am of opinion, that every dissenting minister is, in some degree, obliged to refrain from opposing the opinions espoused by his people, unless he would choose, through a kind of Quixote-zeal for the propagation of truth, to relinquish the means of his subsistence, and his prospect of usefulness in his ministerial capacity. In short, there are great obstructions to the progress of useful knowledge,

ledge, both in the Church of England, and among the Dissenters, which, not the rash efforts of impatient zeal, but time and prudent management alone, can remove.

I now proceed to take notice of the comparisons drawn between the Church of England and the Dissenters, and the censures cast upon the former, in the pamphlets under consideration : concerning which I must take the liberty to say, that I am fearful lest they should contribute something towards promoting a spirit of censoriousness, and reviving that alienation and disaffection, between the different sects of christians, which, to the honour of the present age, seem to be gradually dying away.

We, doubtless, think that our mode of worship, and our situation as Dissenters, are, on some accounts at least, preferable to those of the Church of England ; or we should not separate from it. But it may be questioned whether frequently to remind us of these advantages can answer any other end, than to strengthen that partiality, which we are ready enough to entertain for our own interest, and to alienate our affections from our brethren of

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the establishment. At least, this must certainly be the consequence of those comparisons, in which prejudice in favour of the Dissenters has any concern. And whether the passages, referred to in the following paragraphs, were entirely dictated by calm reasoning and impartial judgment, I leave you and the world to determine.

In the Free Address, (*a*) Dissenters are exhorted "to regard their situation with respect, " since among them alone, in this country, is " the worship of the only living and true God " known, and the purity of the christian worship exhibited." In the same work it is asserted, (*b*) " that all, who join in the prayers of the Church of England, pay divine " honours to inferior and derived beings, as if " they were the true and very God, which is " certainly undisguised impiety and idolatry:" and again, (*c*) " that the form of worship in " the Church of England, besides containing " many articles of faith the very reverse of the " most important doctrines of genuine christianity, as delivered in the New Testament, derogates from the sacred rites of the only " living and true God, and is idolatrous." In

(*a*) page 13. (*b*) p. 18. (*c*) p. 39.

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the remarks on Dr. Blackstone, (*d*) you say  
 “ That it is far from being the truth, that  
 “ there is no manifest impiety—in the forms  
 “ of the Church of England.” And afterwards,  
 “ (*e*) That you cannot help considering the  
 “ established Church of England, the establish-  
 “ ed Church of Scotland, and every established  
 “ church in the world to be idolatrous, in  
 “ which supreme worship is paid to any other  
 “ than the one God and Father of all: though  
 “ you do not consider those persons as guilty  
 “ of the *sin* of idolatry, who really think that  
 “ the Athanasian doctrine of the trinity is con-  
 “ sistent with the belief of the divine unity.”

Surely, Sir, so heavy a charge against the Church of England, as that of idolatry and impiety, should either have been totally suppressed, or should have had some better supports, than positive assertions and vehement censures. “ To pay to inferior and derived  
 “ beings, knowing them to be such, those ho-  
 “ nours, which are due to the Supreme Power,” will, I fancy, be allowed to be a proper definition of idolatry. If so, it is most evident, that neither the compilers of the established

(*d*) page 7. (*e*) p. 26. note.

liturgy,

liturgy, nor the greater part of those who make use of it, can possibly be chargeable with this crime; since they believe, or imagine they believe, the proper divinity of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, and, at the same time, are firmly persuaded of the unity of the divine nature. While they acknowledge and worship the one living and true God, whatever vague, confused, or absurd ideas they may have of his essence, or under whatever names they may choose to address him; it is (as you have said) uncharitable to charge them with impiety, and consequently (as I think) unreasonable to term their worship idolatrous.

With regard to those who see the absurdity of the Athanasian hypothesis, and adopt a system of theology different from that which is received in the service of the church, and who, nevertheless, choose to continue members of it, it must be owned that they labour under considerable inconveniencies and difficulties. And, for the sake of such persons, whose number is at present very considerable and will probably increase, it were much to be wished, that the established liturgy were revised and altered. But, even as the matter now stands, I cannot see that they deserve the heavy

heavy charge of idolatry. If they be christians in any sense of the word, they must think, that a high degree of honour and respect is due to the Saviour of the world ; and may we not suppose, that, while the trinitarian is presenting unto him divine honours, they pay him that tribute of reverence and gratitude, which they apprehend to be due to his exalted character ? Or, if there be any parts of the service, which cannot, with any propriety, be made use of, but upon the supposition of the proper divinity of Christ, ought we not to suppose that the persons of whom we are speaking pass over such passages without notice ; rather than imagine, that they voluntarily bring upon themselves the guilt of idolatry, by paying supreme religious homage to one, whom they believe to be an inferior and derived being ?

In short, it appears to me, that no form of words whatever, considered in themselves, can be termed idolatrous or impious ; and that their idolatry and impiety depend entirely upon the intention of the person who makes use of them. It is, therefore, at least inaccurate, to apply these terms to the liturgy of the Church of England ; and it is uncharitable to apply them



them to those who attend upon this form of worship; unless we could suppose that they do it with a direct design to address that worship to a subordinate and created being, which is due only to the Maker and Lord of all. But this would require a degree of stupidity, and of impiety, scarcely to be conceived.

Besides it ought to be considered, that if the charge of impiety and idolatry, brought against the Church of England, were just, it would fall with equal weight upon the greater part of the Dissenters, who believe the doctrine of trinity in unity, and scruple not to avow it in their devotions. So that, instead of saying that, "among the Dissenters alone the worship of the one living and true God is known," it should have been said, that notwithstanding the clear light of christianity, the Romish Church, the Church of England, and all the other sects into which the christian world is divided, are strangers to true religion, and, like the heathen nations, are guilty of impiety and idolatry: excepting only a small part of the Protestant Dissenters, among whom the Deity is worshipped in spirit and in truth. From the premises this conclusion is unavoidable: a conclusion which one cannot draw without

without surprise, from premises suggested by a liberal and enlarged mind. But we must not hope, that a zeal for speculative opinions, and perfect universal charity, will ever be united.

Let me ask you, Sir, in the next place, whether you do not think that the zeal of the Author of the Free Address, &c. carried him rather too far, when it led him to assert, (*a*) “that  
“if we take in every thing relating to doctrine, discipline, and method of worship,  
“there is no sect or denomination among us,  
“that is not nearer the standard of the gospel, than the established church:” and, (*b*)  
“that the whole system of modern christianity” (by which he doubtless means that of the Church of England) “is less like to the  
“christianity of the New Testament, than it  
“is to the religion of the Brachmans of Hindostan.” Are not the doctrines received by many of the more rigid Dissenters, who choose to stile themselves Independents, the manner in which they conduct the several parts of worship, and the severe church-discipline which they observe (the Author of the Free Address, &c. himself being judge) *at least as*

(*a*) page 68.    (*b*) page 10.

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exceptionable as any thing in the doctrine, the worship, or even the hierarchy of the Church of England? Not to mention the *Sandimanian* and other sects, whose principles manifestly encourage licentiousness of manners. As to the *Brachmans* of *Indostan*, I am so little acquainted with their religion, that I own myself unable to judge of the propriety of the comparison.

In your View of the Principles of the Dissenters, (*a*) you draw a comparison between them and the members of the established church, which I cannot help thinking to be, in a certain degree, partial and unjust.

With regard to dissenting ministers you assert, (*b*) “ that though, in general, inferior to  
“ the clergy of the established church, in classical knowledge; they are not inferior to  
“ them in philosophical knowledge, and are  
“ probably superior to them, with respect to  
“ theology and an acquaintance with the scriptures.” Whether any man can have had an acquaintance with the world, sufficiently extensive to enable him to form such a com-

(*a*) page 82, &c.      (*b*) page 83.

parison,



parison, is with me extremely doubtful. Different persons will certainly judge very differently, in such cases, according to their situations and connections : and I can conceive of no end, which can be answered, by casting out vague and uncertain conjectures, on these subjects. It is for the honour both of the Church and the Dissenters, that each of them can boast of many, among the number of their clergy, who have not only discovered great abilities and learning in their own particular province, but have shewn themselves masters of various other branches of useful and ornamental knowledge. And it were devoutly to be wished, that, instead of making invidious comparisons with regard to our respective merit, we should all heartily unite our endeavours, in our several ways, to promote the real advantage and improvement of mankind. It is pity, that a man possessed of such abilities, and such inclinations, for advancing both theological and philosophical knowledge, as Dr. Priestley, should lose a single moment, in determining whether the clergy of the established church, or among the Dissenters, possess the greater share of knowledge, or in debating any other questions of trifling consequence.

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That

That Dissenting ministers are, in general, more carefully educated, and in some instances enjoy greater advantages, in our private Academies, than the clergy of the Establishment, in the public Universities, may possibly be true. But if it be, it must be owned that the education of Divines for the Church of England is sadly defective indeed. For it will be no very difficult task, to point out many defects and improprieties, in the mode of education which prevails among Dissenters.

In all Academies for the education of dissenting ministers, that I have heard of, by far the greater part of the four or five years which are devoted to preparatory studies, are employed, in going through a long series of enquiries and debates, relating to the refinements and subtleties of metaphysics, or to subjects of theological controversy, and in turning over dry and tedious volumes of annotations, commentaries and expositions, to fix the precise meaning of difficult texts of scripture. This laborious and, in a great measure, fruitless course of study, is made the principal business of students for the Ministry among Dissenters; and to this every other employment and pursuit must be subordinate. No wonder that

that young persons of a gay and sprightly turn generally pass over such a course in a very cursory manner, and often acquire a habit of indolence and dissipation, very prejudicial to them in future life. No wonder that those who have phlegm enough in their constitutions to be able, while they are young, to sit down quietly to such labours, should acquire a conceited air in conversation, and a certain pedantic awkwardness of manner, which distinguish them from the rest of the world, as plainly as if their occupation was written upon their foreheads. As the case now stands, it is only those, who have good sense and taste enough to pursue, of their own accord, more useful and polite accomplishments than they are likely to acquire by listening to the debates of learned metaphysicians, theologians, or critics, who can be expected to come into the world without any disagreeable peculiarities, and with the proper qualifications for the character in which they are to appear.

I would not be understood to insinuate, that students for the ministry should take no pains to obtain accurate ideas on the most important subjects of metaphysics and theology, or to acquire a taste for judicious and manly criticism:

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but,



but, I apprehend, that these should be considered only as secondary objects; and that they will allow them a degree of attention equal to their importance, if they carefully peruse a few of the best books on these topics; giving an account of what they read, either in writing or conversation, to their tutors, and attending to their remarks upon the several subjects, as they proceed.

It will probably be asked, In what manner then are students for the ministry chiefly to employ their time? And I hope it will not be deemed arrogant or impertinent, if I venture to submit my opinion on this head to the consideration of those, who are concerned in this important branch of education. The plan of business, which I would propose for such students, is as follows:

FIRST; To attend a series of lectures, on the principles of Natural Religion, and on the evidences, design and spirit of Christianity.

SECONDLY; To go through a course of lectures, on the general nature and foundation of virtue, and on the several branches of ethics, as much as possible deduced from experience,

perience, and applied to human life and manners; that they may have a large store of accurate ideas, on those subjects which are, of all others, most proper for discourses from the pulpit.

THIRDLY; To read the scriptures, and the best moral writers, both ancient and modern, with a view to collect and arrange the most just and striking observations, sentiments, &c. which occur, on the several heads of morality; and at proper intervals to submit these compilations to the inspection of their tutors. This will furnish them with a stock of materials, which may be of constant use to them in their future compositions.

FOURTHLY; To attend a series of lectures, in which the principles of universal grammar, and of English grammar in particular, shall be distinctly considered, and the whole art of composition minutely explained; and, after this, another course of lectures, containing a general view of the nature and design of public worship, and public preaching, and particular instructions, with respect to the art of composing both prayers and sermons. It is amazing, that while every apprentice to a mechanical

chanical trade spends many years in learning his business, ministers, even when most regularly educated, should only receive a few occasional instructions, and these long after they have begun to pray, and sometimes after they have begun to preach, in public, concerning the employment in which they are to spend their lives; and that, with regard to prayer, which, to say the least, is one of the most important parts of their public duty, they should scarcely receive any instruction at all.

FIFTHLY; To write original compositions, of various kinds, such as essays, orations, and, last of all prayers, and sermons; which shall be carefully examined by the tutor, and under his direction corrected and altered, and afterwards delivered, *always memoriter*, if practicable, in the presence of all the tutors, and students. One such composition, I should imagine, every student might write, commit to memory, and deliver, at least monthly; by which means he would, in the course of four or five years, acquire a habit of composing, and of speaking in public.

SIXTHLY; To attend a course of lectures, on the art of public-speaking; and frequently  
to



to read, or deliver *memoriter* (at the discretion of the tutor) passages from the best English writers. The delivering of the above mentioned original compositions, and these exercises for reading and speaking, might very well employ one day in every week : and one day in a week is not, surely, too much to be devoted to this purpose, by students, who expect to speak in public, once at least, every week, as long as they live.

Besides these several branches of business, which ought, I think, to take the lead of all others in a course of preparatory study, for the ministerial office, it will doubtless be necessary to allow some portion of time, for the critical study of the scriptures, for reading the classics, and for acquiring some general knowledge of history, mathematics, natural philosophy, &c. &c.

I have been led into this long digression, by an earnest desire of seeing some improvements, in the mode of education for the christian ministry, adopted in dissenting academies ; and the importance of the subject must be my apology. If, after perusing what has now been suggested, any of those, who have the care of these  
useful

useful seminaries of learning, should apprehend, that *their* method of education is, in a great measure free from the defects and faults referred to above, and should be disposed to say,

“ We hope we have reformed these things  
“ indifferently with us ;”

I have only to reply ;

“ O reform them altogether.”

But to return to the comparison, which you have drawn between the clergy of the established church, and dissenting ministers. In the Considerations on Church-authority (*a*) you assert, “ That the dissenting clergy, in  
“ proportion to their numbers, far excel the  
“ clergy of the established church in religious  
“ and scriptural knowledge; and that sensible and ingenious men among the clergy  
“ are in general any thing but divines.” This (to allude to your own language to Dr. Blackstone) is very roundly asserted; but *gratis dictum* all. Will not the established clergy consider such a charge as this, when no evidence whatever is brought to support it, as mere abuse? Perhaps you think the matter is so

(*a*) page 57.

evident to common observation, that it needs no proof. And if, by religious and scriptural knowledge, you mean an acquaintance with the endless debates and useless distinctions of polemical divines, it may possibly be allowed, without any direct evidence, that what you assert is very true; but, at the same time, it must be said, that you assert what is very much to their honour. For, what effect have such studies ever produced; what effect are they ever likely to produce, but to enable men to puzzle and confound the understandings of the common people, and create animosities and contentions among them? But if by religious and scriptural knowledge you mean, just ideas of the nature and importance of true religion, and of the design and spirit of Christianity, I assert, that the clergy of the established church, to say, the least, are not, in this respect at all inferior to their dissenting brethren. And, in proof of this assertion, I appeal to the usual strain and spirit of their public discourses; which are I apprehend, in general, more practical, moral and useful, than the sermons of dissenting ministers.

When you say, (*a*) "That dissenting ministers, and especially those of the rational View, &c. page 88.

F

" part



“ part of them, have lost almost all their pre-  
 “ ciseness and strictness of behaviour, and  
 “ are hardly to be distinguished from the more  
 “ decent clergymen ;” you leave us at a loss  
 to determine, whether this circumstance is  
 mentioned to their honour, or their discredit.  
 I suppose, indeed, that all those Dissenters who  
 have themselves shaken off that stiffness and  
 preciseness of behaviour, for which their an-  
 cestors were ridiculous, will think it to the  
 honour of their ministers, that they should do  
 the same. But, if this be your opinion, you  
 should, I think, have expressed yourself more  
 explicitly : for, as the above-cited passage  
 now stands, it will probably be understood by  
 many persons to convey this unjust and offen-  
 sive insinuation, That those dissenting minis-  
 ters, who have the *least degree* of preciseness  
 and strictness of behaviour, are yet superior  
 even to *the more decent* clergymen, though at  
 present, indeed, hardly to be distinguished  
 from them. A sentiment which implies a de-  
 gree of inattention and partiality, of which I  
 will never suppose you capable.

With regard to the laity among the Dissen-  
 ters, and in the Church of England, you seem  
 plainly to intimate, (*a*) That the former dif-  
 (*a*) View, &c. page 86.

cover

cover a degree of wisdom and goodness much superior to the latter, in laying their ministers under greater restraints, with regard to decency and strictness of behaviour. "Levities," you say, "that are hardly noticed in clergy-men, would be the cause of expulsion to many dissenting ministers." By *levities*, I take it for granted you do not mean *vices*, but an indulgence in the gaieties natural to youth, and in the fashionable amusements of the age: such, for instance, as conforming to the customary modes of dress; attending diversions of music and dancing; frequenting theatrical entertainments; enjoying the exercise of hunting, &c. &c. Now, I grant, that these things are offensive to the majority of the Dissenters, and that such levities as these would be the cause of expulsion to many dissenting ministers. Of this we have a sufficient proof in a recent fact: the dismissal of a young minister of good moral character, from the service of a society of respectable, genteel, and in their own opinion moderate Dissenters, in a large and polite city, on no other pretence, than for an occasional attendance upon the theatre, and for quoting some moral sentences from *Shakespeare*, in his sermons. But, such a degree of

singularity and preciseness as this cannot surely be much to their honour.

Unless it can be proved, that all kinds of diversion and amusement are wrong (which will not, I think, be a very easy task) I cannot conceive, on what principles it can be shown to be criminal in ministers, to allow themselves in the moderate use of such entertainments as those already mentioned. What is innocent in their people must, for aught that I can see to the contrary, be innocent in them. Their character is indeed grave and important; and the duties of their station require a considerable degree of attention, application, and seriousness of mind. And therefore, that love of amusement and pleasure, which would give them a habit of indolence and dissipation, and a disinclination to those studies and employments to which they have devoted their lives, would be in them peculiarly worthy of censure. But still, they are men; and men, who from their education possess some degree of taste and refinement: they have eyes and ears, passions and feelings, in common with their hearers; and are, at least, equally capable with them of relishing the beauties of nature, of being delighted with the melody of sound,



found, or of being agreeably impressed and agitated by a lively fictitious representation of human characters. I can see no reason, therefore, why they should deny themselves those gratifications, to which their particular dispositions and taste incline them, and especially such exercises as may be, in a manner, necessary to preserve their health and spirits, and prevent the disagreeable effects of a sedentary life: provided, however, that they always keep within the bounds of innocence, and support a virtuous, respectable, and useful character in the world. And I hope the time is hastening, when the Dissenters, in imitation of the laudable example of their brethren of the establishment, will lay no unnecessary restraints upon the conduct of their ministers, but will consider them as men of like passions with themselves.

But the most offensive, and perhaps the most unfair comparison, which you have drawn between the laity of the Church of England and the Dissenters, is with respect to religious knowledge.

Is it not *rather too much*, to say, (a) "That it may well be supposed, that *all the unthink-*

(a) View, &c. page 83.

"ing

"*ing* part of the nation will go with the establishment, whatever it be." Are there, then, no unthinking people among Dissenters; none who are wholly directed, in the choice of their form of religion, by education and custom; none who are unable to give a rational account of the principles of the dissenting interest? Let us not esteem it a proof that other people do not think at all, that they think differently from us.

Can you have been witness to a sufficient number of facts, to be able to assure the world, or even yourself (*b*) "That the laity among the Dissenters, in proportion to their numbers, far excel those of the established church in religious knowledge; and that the ignorance of the latter, especially where there are no Dissenters, is deplorable, and almost beyond belief?" You seem to have been sensible, that this assertion was rather too positive, when you wrote the View of the Principles, &c. for you there only say, "That you think it evidently fact, that Dissenters in general are not possessed of less knowledge, than churchmen of the same class and rank in life; and

(*b*) Considerations, &c. page 57.

"that

“that it is rather probable, that they are possessed of more.”——That there is a degree of ignorance, among the common people in general, scarcely to be credited by a person who hath not been conversant with the world, I allow. But this ignorance, however surprising, is common to the vulgar of all denominations, and hath been so in every age. And, I fancy, the truth concerning the common people, both among the Dissenters, in the Church of England, and, in short, in all religious denominations, is this; that they have some general principles of morality and religion, sufficient to regulate their conduct, mixed with much ignorance and many vulgar errors; and that the greater part of that, which with them usually passes for knowledge, is nothing more than a vague and confused apprehension of certain things, which they can neither explain to others, nor understand themselves.

As to your assertion, (a) “That, with respect to reading and knowledge of every kind, Dissenters are sinking fast to a level with the members of the established church;” (which plainly implies, that *knowledge of every kind* is upon the decline among Dissenters, and that even in our present low state we are still superior



superior in *knowledge of every kind* to the members of the established church) nothing can be more amazing than that it should ever have dropped from the pen of Dr. Priestley.

The preceding paragraphs have convinced me, and they may perhaps convince you, that there is much truth and good-sense in the common saying, "That comparisons are odious."

In the publications which gave birth to these remarks, I farther observe, that the Dissenters, and, especially the more rational part of them (as they are termed) are frequently censured for a want of zeal in supporting the dissenting interest.

Now, if by zeal for the dissenting interest be meant, such a high opinion of its importance, as would lead a man to suppose that the whole cause of truth, liberty, religion, and christianity depends upon its support, and vehemently to exclaim against the Church of England, and against all establishments whatever; it is granted that it does actually abate, and it is hoped that it will still continue to abate. We may be assured, that in proportion as men become indifferent to subjects of speculation

tion and controversy, from a conviction that they are of little importance to the virtue or the happiness of mankind, their attachment to any particular sect or party will diminish. We may be assured that, while a friendly intercourse between persons of different religious opinions is maintained, the topics on which they differ will be discussed with ease and freedom (for I apprehend it is not a fact, (*a*) that the politeness of the times prevents all well-bred people from introducing any conversation on such topics;) by frequent collision the prejudices of each party will be gradually worn away; and liberal and enlarged sentiments, and a spirit of unbounded charity will be continually gaining ground. And, if the decrease of bigotry must be attended, as you assert, (*b*) with a decrease of just zeal; if “this free and easy intercourse between Dissenters and church-men must prove more fatal to the dissenting interest than all the persecutions they underwent in former times;” in the name of all that is generous and good I will say, Be it so. For who would wish to establish the dissenting interest on the ruins of moderation and charity? who would scruple to part with a small portion even of just zeal, if

(*a*) View, &c. page 87.      (*b*) Id.

we can hereby diminish the power of that hateful and destructive Demon, Bigotry, and increase the influence and authority of the divine spirit of Benevolence, in the hearts of men?

But I own, I am not apprehensive that Dissenters in general will lose that degree of zeal for their cause, which it deserves, and which is necessary for its support. It has been suggested, indeed, by the Author of the Free Address, &c. (*a*) That the Dissenters discover their want of zeal, by the slender provision which they make for their ministers, and by the reluctance with which they too generally contribute towards the support of their common interests. He has insisted so largely on this head, that it seems necessary to give it a distinct consideration.

It is, doubtless, reasonable, that dissenting ministers should be provided for in such a manner, as shall raise them above indigence and contempt, and enable them to make an appearance in the world suitable to their character and station. It were likewise much to be wished, (*b*) “ That they should feel them-

(*a*) Sect. 3.      (*b*) Free Address, &c. p. 41.

“ selves



“ selves in a situation in which they may  
 “ freely think and act, as themselves shall  
 “ judge the cause of christianity, and the in-  
 “ terest of their people demand.” And, by  
 the way, many persons are of opinion, that  
 these ends would be most effectually answered,  
 by giving ministers some kind of security for  
 their comfortable subsistence, while they are  
 chargeable with no manifest neglect of their  
 ministerial duty, or irregularity in their moral  
 conduct. This would, it is apprehended, give  
 them a degree of independence, which would  
 contribute both to their happiness and their  
 usefulness. And notwithstanding what is as-  
 serted in the Considerations on Church-author-  
 ity, (*b*) it is far from being evident, that  
 there is any thing cowardly, contemptible, or  
 inconsistent with the spirit of men and chris-  
 tians for ministers to desire such an indepen-  
 dence. It is unnatural and enthusiastical to  
 expect, that they should be so entirely devoted  
 to the concerns of another world as to neglect  
 their interest and happiness in the present state.  
 Nor is there any reason to suppose, that an at-  
 tention to the concerns of this life, and to  
 those of the next at the same time, is more

(*a*) page 73.

inconsistent in ministers than in other people.

And, as dissenting ministers have reason to expect a decent provision from those by whom they are employed ; so there seems to be a kind of obligation, upon the more opulent Dissenters, to do something towards the support of public worship in those societies, who are not able to provide for their own ministers ; and towards the liberal education of persons to be employed in the office of the christian ministry among Dissenters. These important objects perhaps require a greater degree of attention than is at present paid to them.

But after all, while there are rational Dissenters amongst us ; that is, while there are any who separate from the Church of England with a real view to their own moral and religious improvement, we need not fear that the cause will sink for want of a proper support. Such persons will always esteem it of great importance, that men should worship their Maker, in that manner which they think most acceptable to him, and most for their own advantage. And this single consideration will be sufficient to induce them to exert themselves for

for the support of public worship, in that class of Dissenters which they choose to espouse. They may not think it necessary, in the present state of things, that they should be inspired with the same zeal, or expend their possessions with the same freedom, in behalf of the dissenting interest, as their forefathers. They may not esteem themselves under any kind of obligation to adopt the severity of their manners, and deny themselves the innocent gratifications and amusements of life. But nevertheless, it may reasonably be presumed, that they will chearfully contribute their respective parts towards the support of an interest, which they esteem valuable and important. Nay, there seems little reason to doubt that, if the Dissenters of the present age were in the same situation with the primitive christians, or the Puritans of the last century, they would like them be zealous for their natural liberties, and would grudge no expence which the exigence of the times might require. It must, however, be owned, that different persons will expend their wealth in this cause more or less freely, in proportion to their ideas of the superior excellence of the dissenting mode of worship, the degree in which they value their own religious im-



improvement and that of others, and the natural generosity of their tempers.

Another circumstance which you seem to consider as a proof of the decay of zeal among Dissenters, is the frequent occasional and even constant conformity to the Church of England, which happens among them.

But, with regard to occasional conformity, I can see no impropriety, and much less any immorality, in sometimes attending the service of the established church, and this not merely “in the character of a spectator, to “indulge a liberal curiosity,” but in that of a devout worshipper: excepting indeed where a person has such very peculiar opinions, or such very delicate feelings, that he cannot go to church “without being shocked at what he “hears there;” and, in that case, I think, he had much better not go at all. If one of those, who are called rational Dissenters, happen to reside for a time in a place, where there are no Dissenters but those, whose manner of worship, and strain of preaching, are highly disagreeable to him; such a person would not, I apprehend, deserve to be censured for a want of just zeal for the dissenting interest, if he chose

chose to attend public worship in the Church of England.

In such a situation, a man is not to consider what antichristian errors he may countenance, (for it is very little influence indeed that his example in this case can have) but where he has the fairest prospect of personal improvement and pleasure. And I fancy there are very few rational Dissenters, who will not think with me, that a man may worship his Maker, with much more devotion, in the service of the Church of England, notwithstanding all its defects, than in the crude, injudicious and often mysterious and unintelligible extemporary prayers of the rigid independents; and that the sermons usually delivered in the former are, beyond all comparison, more plain, practical, and useful, than those which are to be heard among the latter.

Nor does it appear to me to be any objection to occasional conformity, that a person is obliged to pass over some parts of the service of the church without notice; provided he can so far make use of it, as to perform an act of religious worship which his own mind can approve. If this be a real objection, it is  
not

not peculiar to the Church of England, but may very frequently occur in the method of worship made use of among Dissenters. You will say, perhaps, that, upon the same principles, a man might innocently join in public worship, with any sect of christians, and even with Jews and Mahometans. And supposing this consequence be allowed, what is there in it so alarming and dreadful? Supposing a man is in a Popish or Mahometan country, where there is no other public worship, than that of the Romish or Turkish church; if he think that he can find any thing good in the established devotions, or reap any advantage from attending upon them; wherein consists the mighty crime of occasional conformity?

And if occasional conformity, in such a situation, may be excused and even vindicated, I apprehend that in the same circumstances, constant conformity is likewise defensible.

You will please to observe, that I say, *in the same circumstances*; for whenever a person has an opportunity of uniting with a society of christians, where religious worship is performed in a manner more agreeable to his views of religion, and better calculated for his improvement



ment, than in the Church of England, I agree with you in thinking, that his conduct is highly worthy of censure, if, from any motives of interest or ambition, or from any other worldly consideration, he becomes a member of the established church. Dissenters may then indeed be charged with a want of just zeal, when they, in any degree, sacrifice their moral and religious improvement, for the sake of placing themselves in the way of wealth and preferment. Such conformity as this, the most moderate Dissenter will not attempt to defend, nor can the most zealous churchman approve. It is, however, proceeding much too far to suppose, (*a*) that all who conform to the Church of England are influenced by such motives; or that no person whatever has left the Dissenters, after mature consideration, and with the full consent and approbation of his mind.

With regard to those dissenting ministers who conform, it must be owned that there are frequently such circumstances attending their conversion, as oblige us to conclude, concerning many of them, that necessity, or ambition, not real conviction, is the cause of their conformity. But that all dissenting ministers,

(*a*) See Free Address, &c. p. 58.

who conform do offer violence to their consciences, cannot, I think, be asserted, without at the same time supposing that by far the greater part of the clergy do the same. For it is indeed a poor apology for them to say, (*b*) that theology makes no part of their study at the University; that they see all their friends and acquaintance subscribe without scruple; and that they themselves subscribe without properly attending to the nature of the action, or being aware of the objections which have been made against it. Such ignorance and prejudice as this, if it could be supposed to exist among the clergy, would stand in need of at least as much apology, as their subscribing to articles which they do not believe. Should we not rather suppose, that they have such ideas of the affair of subscription, that they can subscribe without incurring the disapprobation of their own minds? Is it not possible to conceive, that they may be able to vindicate their conduct to themselves on the principles of benevolence, and think it right to submit to the usual forms of admission into the church (which it is not in their power to alter) rather than give up the respectable and useful character of a clergy-

(*b*) Free Address p. 60.

man?

man? May they not apprehend, that the difficulties which they labour under are to be met with even among Dissenters; where, in order to be acceptable and useful, a man is under a necessity, if not of subscribing to articles, yet of conforming, in a certain degree, to the customs, opinions, and prejudices of mankind? And may they not look upon such conformity, in either situation, to be lawful, where it affords a man an opportunity of being more useful to mankind, than he could have a probability of being without it? To vindicate the character of the subscribing clergy from the charge of prevaricating with their consciences, it is not necessary to assert, that these ideas and sentiments *are* just; it is enough to suppose that after deliberate consideration they *appear* so to them. And surely one should make this, or any other supposition, rather than charge men, who in other respects support an irreproachable and amiable character, with the violation of their integrity,

Before I close these remarks, justice requires me to acknowledge, that the view you have given of the political principles and conduct of the Dissenters, and your repeated attempts to vindicate them from the charge of being



disloyal subjects, merit their thanks, and may be of real service to their cause. The manner in which Dr. Blackstone had represented them was certainly, to say the least, injudicious; and he could never expect that severe censures, cast upon so respectable a body, by a person whose opinions are generally received with deference, would pass without notice. What you assert concerning the Dissenters is confirmed by a long series of facts, and will I doubt not continue true, while Great Britain continues to enjoy the blessings of equal government; (a) "That there are no subjects of the  
 " realm, who are from principle and interest  
 " more attached to their king and country  
 " than they are; and that every insinuation to  
 " the contrary is malicious and absurd."

I cannot, however, proceed so far with you as to say, (b) "That the Dissenters can hardly  
 " be said to wish for any alteration, which the  
 " government can effect for them." That they enjoy some of their most important liberties only by *connivance*, and through the moderation and good sense of their *governors*, and not under the protection of the *law*; That the condition of their being admitted

(a) See Free Address, &c. page 58. (b) Id. page 60.

into posts of honour and profit in the civil state is such, as, with regard to many among them, amounts to an actual exclusion; and that they are obliged to contribute their full share towards the support of a body of men, from whose labours they reap no advantage; are hardships of which it is impossible they should be insensible, and from which they must certainly wish to be delivered. And this is perfectly consistent with a just sense of the advantages they at present enjoy, with an undissembled spirit of loyalty to their Prince, and with a becoming submission to the government under which they live.

Much less can I conceive it to be true (as the Author of the Free Address, &c. maintains) “(a) that the enlargement of our civil privileges would be unfavourable to our religious character. That christians are, in this life, “in a course of discipline to train them up “for a better;” and that they are bound to relinquish ever thing that is dear to them on earth, rather than resign their integrity and their hopes of immortality, will be readily granted. But surely it doth not follow from hence, that it is necessary, to complete their

(a) page 28, &c.

christian character, that they should actually suffer persecution, or (a) "That it is *cæteris paribus*, more probable that we are disciples of Christ, if we are frowned upon by the powers of the world, than if we have free access to all the emoluments of it." If this were true; if (b) "in a situation in every respect favourable to the pursuits and enjoyments of this life, it would not be easy for a man to attain any thing like a satisfactory conviction, that he had the proper temper and disposition of a christian;" it must certainly be the duty of every christian, who is so *unfortunate* as to be placed in circumstances which do not expose him to any considerable hardships, voluntarily to subject himself to trials and persecutions, that by exercise and experience he may acquire the habits of christian fortitude. A doctrine, which has always been urged in favour of a monastic life, and which has led to all the unnecessary and ridiculous mortifications and penances, which enthusiasm and popery have ever invented. A doctrine, however, so directly contrary to nature and to the happiness of mankind, that it is impossible it should ever have been adopted in the wise and benevolent religion of *Jesus Christ*.

(a) Free Address, &c. page 29. (b) page 30.

Besides,



Besides, if the public scenes and the more exalted stations of life are attended with peculiar temptations, they afford a good man an opportunity of discovering, exercising and improving his virtue, which it would be cowardice and folly to decline. And if, in the midst of all the temptations which the riches and honours of the world present before him, he continues inflexible to ill, and resolutely good, I can see no reason which he can have to doubt, whether he possesses the proper temper and disposition of a christian, or whether he should be able, with the same firmness of mind, to maintain his integrity inviolate, in a season of distress and persecution.

After having perused the preceding Remarks, you will not, I think, consider them as wholly unnecessary, or entirely disapprove of this attempt to prevent the probable consequences of your inadvertency: especially if you consider the present situation of public affairs, and call to mind what you have said, in your remarks upon Dr. Blackstone; (a) “ That it is now  
 “ particularly requisite, that every thing should  
 “ be said and done, that may tend to make all  
 “ the different classes and denominations of  
 (a) page 3.

“ people

“ people think well of one another ; that lay-  
 “ ing aside all illiberal and party prejudices,  
 “ we may unite together for the public good.”

I will only detain you, while I ask you two or three questions relating to some passages in your last publication ; and while I suggest one general observation, which appears to me to be of very considerable importance.

The queries I have to propose are :

Is it perfectly consistent with historical truth, to say, (*a*) That after the Act of Uniformity, almost every clergyman of any character for learning, integrity and piety resigned their livings? Did not Tillotson, Wilkins, Burnet, &c. &c. continue in the church? And is it probable that, with such examples, the inferior clergy should be, in general, destitute of learning, integrity and piety?

What part of the Dissenters do you mean, when you say, (*b*) “ That some of them seem  
 “ much of the same opinion with the Quakers  
 “ with respect to civil government, and to  
 “ think, that, in all cases, especially those in

(*a*) View, &c. page 21. (*b*) Id. page 42.

“ which

“ which violence is used or apprehended, they  
 “ as christians have nothing to do to inter-  
 “ meddle ?”

How do you reconcile what you assert (c) concerning the ecclesiastical state of Sweden, with the account which Vertot gives of the successful attempt which *Gustavus* made to establish Lutheranism upon the ruins of popery, and particularly with this assertion, (d) “ That  
 “ *Gustavus* made himself master both of the  
 “ religion and revenues of the church ?”

On what authority do you say, (e) That it is computed that 38000 protestant Dissenters perished in prison, during the reign of Charles II ?

The general observation, with which I shall conclude these remarks, is this : That a change in religious opinions or customs is most effectually accomplished by mild and gentle methods, and by gradual and almost imperceptible steps.

Great occasions may sometimes occur, when a sudden revolution in religious affairs may be-

(c) View, &c. page 47. (d) Vertot's History of the Revolutions in Sweden 6th Ed. page 250. (e) View, &c. page 75.



come expedient, and even necessary. And, at such seasons, those who boldly venture into the field of danger, and bravely hazard their properties and their lives in support of the religious liberties of mankind, justly deserve, and will certainly obtain immortal honours. Nevertheless, violent changes are usually attended with such numerous and grievous calamities, and after all leave things in so unsettled and imperfect a state, that they are, perhaps, never, or very seldom, on the whole to be desired. But, however this be, it seems extremely probable, that much more important advantages may generally be gained by prudence and gentleness, than by opposition and violence.

If, for instance, a change in the constitution and worship of the Church of England be desirable (as I fancy most of its own members, as well as the whole body of the Dissenters, will allow) it is not, I apprehend, to be accomplished by inveighing against establishments in general: for, after all that has hitherto been advanced to the contrary, they appear to me very beneficial to society, and highly expedient, in order to preserve a due regard to the duties of public worship among mankind. Nor  
is

is it likely that the desired effect should be produced, or any other good end whatever answered, by pronouncing harsh censures upon the constitution or worship of the Church of England ; by treating it with ridicule or contempt ; or even by enumerating, time after time, those improprieties and defects, which are already sufficiently known and generally acknowledged.

Nothing is so likely to hasten this long wished for event, as an unrestrained and friendly intercourse between persons of all denominations. This will gradually remove that groundless partiality which every man is ready to entertain for his own religious sect ; will promote a spirit of free enquiry ; will lead persons of every denomination, to see the defects which are common to all, and to consider the distinctions which subsist between them as matters of trifling importance ; and thus may prepare the way for the establishment of some general form of religion, in which by far the greater part of the community will, without scruple, unite.

In like manner, with regard to the propagation of religious knowledge in general ; I

am of opinion, that direct and open attacks upon the errors and prejudices of mankind are likely to be of very little advantage. In all attempts of this kind we meet with two great, I had almost said insuperable difficulties.

In the first place, we are far from being absolutely certain, that what we apprehend to be truth is so in reality. There is so much difficulty in taking a full and complete view of a subject, and in ascertaining the connection between the several steps of an argument; and consequently so much fallacy in human reasoning; that (excepting only with regard to self-evident and primary truths, which the mind receives as soon as they are proposed) we must, after all our speculations, remain in some degree of doubt and uncertainty; and we may truly say with an ancient writer; (a)

“ Il n'est desir plus naturel, que le desir de cognoître la verité. Nous essayons tous les moyens que nous efforts font courts, car la verité n'est pas un acquest, ny chose qui se laisse prendre & manier & encores moins posséder à l'esprit humain. Elle loge dedans le sein

(a) Charron de la Sagesse. Amsterd. Edit. page 112.



de Dieu, c'est là son gîte et sa retraite.—Nous sommes nés à queſtré la verité : la poſſeder appartient à une plus haute et grande puiſſance.”

A man, who from his own experience feels the force of theſe ſentiments, will have little zeal for eſtabliſhing any particular ſyſtem of opinions, on ſubjects which have long been debated, and concerning which it is not probable that mankind will ever be agreed.

But, ſuppoſing that our opinions reſted upon ſuch evidence, as left us no room for doubt, and enabled us to convince all, who are accuſtomed to reaſoning and reflection, of their truth : ſtill we have another difficulty to encounter, when we attempt to convey our ideas to mankind in general, and eſtabliſh our opinions among them. They have never gone through that courſe of reading and ſtudy, which has led us to our preſent manner of thinking ; they have never been inured to cloſe reaſoning, or habituated themſelves to judge of opinions, by the ſtrength of evidence with which they are attended. Their ideas, on ſubjects of ſpeculation and debate, from the nature of their education, and their circumſtances in life, muſt neceſſarily be vague and confuſed ;  
and

and many of the notions, which they have accidentally gathered up, strongly prejudice them against those which we are desirous of giving them.

In this case, what course must we take? To censure or ridicule those opinions which they hold sacred, is only to insult their weakness, and confirm them in their prejudices: it is a practice in which no man ought to indulge himself, who is not disposed to say;

*Odi profanum vulgus, et arceo.*

To place before them the series of arguments on which our opinions are founded, is to call them to a kind of intellectual exercise to which they are unaccustomed, and to assign them a task, which they have not leisure to execute. The only thing, then, that is practicable, and therefore certainly the only thing that is necessary, is, to suffer their errors and prejudices to die away without notice; and to inculcate upon them those obvious and primary truths, which are founded upon general experience, which approve themselves to every understanding, and which lie at the foundation of a virtuous conduct.

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If we can, by any method, direct men's attention chiefly to these important subjects, we shall soon see, that genuine virtue and religion may be effectually supported without the help of controversy; and that the little assistance which virtuous practice may sometimes derive from dubious opinions, may be better supplied by a steady regard to those principles which are obvious and certain: we shall soon be convinced, that the little errors and prejudices, which men may happen to imbibe, will have no very pernicious influence upon their dispositions and characters. For, as you justly observe (a) "In all modes of religion which subsist among mankind, however subversive of virtue they may be in theory, there is some *Salvo* for good morals;" and (b) Such a foundation hath the God of nature laid for the practice of virtue in our hearts, that it is hardly in the power of any error in our heads to erase it."

I have nothing further to add, but to assure you, that I shall esteem myself happy, if these Remarks may in the least degree contribute,

(a) Essay on Government p. 110.

(b) Free Address to Protestant Dissenters, on the Lord's Supper p. 64.



to promote a spirit of moderation and charity, among the several denominations of christians; and to perswade you, in your future attempts to promote useful knowledge, to submit your zeal to the guidance of prudence and discretion, and to *write*, as I doubt not you *live*, under the influence of *all the virtues*.

I am, with sincere esteem,

Rev. Sir,

Your most obedient humble servant,

A DISSENTER.

